

**Experiencing the First Year of a Baby's Life Using
Naturalistic Observation Within a Case Study**

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Abstract

This case study explores my journey as a researcher undertaking Naturalistic Observation for the first time. Naturalistic Observation as a research method is non-participant and was first introduced in 1948 by Esther Bick to the training of child psychotherapists at the Tavistock Clinic. It is a challenging method in that it requires the researcher to enter the field without any hypothesis, preconceived ideas, or expectations. The research subject in this study was a baby (Liam) whose name has been changed and whose development I observed from birth to 2 years. In this case, I present moments of the first year of observations which has formed part of my exploration of the study of human development. Even at the initial stage, there were difficulties in identifying a research subject, for there must be no relational link between the observer and the family. It is a very lonely and emotional road, along which the researcher is expected to travel without any of the natural human interactions one might expect in such a situation. There is always a wall required between the family and the observer and yet an intimate relationship does develop simply through the shared observation of the baby and the home environment within which this takes place. In this short article, I examine the challenges and benefits of using Naturalistic Observation through a case study, with perhaps the greatest benefit being the opportunity to understanding in some depth what it is to be human.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Engage with uses and practices of naturalistic, non-participant observation in context
 - Explore strengths and limitations of naturalistic observation
 - Identify personal and professional dilemmas in the role of the observer
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Project Overview and Context

Having engaged in academic research over several years I did not expect to meet with quite the number of challenges encountered on this my first venture into the use of Naturalistic Observation as a research method. This method was completely new to me, but it was the most appropriate choice for the task I was undertaking, namely the observation of a baby as part of my training in Psychoanalytic Infant Observation. Miller, Rustin, Rustin, and Shuttleworth (1989, p. 7) state that

The practice of systematic observation of the development of infants provides the observer with an opportunity to encounter primitive emotional states in the infant and his family, and indeed in the observer's own response to this turbulent environment.

In this case, I seek to share my experiences, both challenging and beneficial, in the anticipation that they may facilitate the journey of other researchers as they undertake their own research. The method consists of observations of infants and their mothers or other caregivers, in natural settings, usually the home, conducted on a regular basis, preferably for an hour in each week for the first 2 years of an infant's life.

As the researcher, I entered the research arena as a stranger to the world of babies. Clearly, none of us can remember this period of our lives and the only way to access it is through having children oneself or through observation, as I have done. Having had no children of my own, I was anxious about whether this experience would affect me emotionally, whether I would be able to maintain distance and how I would fit within the close family unit without being intrusive. Would I be able to remain in the non-participant observer role? It was, therefore, with some trepidation that I prepared for my first visit.

Research Practicalities

Naturalistic observations take place in the baby's home with the intention of studying the interaction between the mother and baby as a whole, within the normal circumstances in which it occurs, and not to abstract from the whole relationship and approach it from a theoretical or pre-defined scientific point of view. The method has been used in psychodynamic psychotherapy training in Great Britain for the observation of infants (Carabine, 2013; Miller et al., 1989; Reid, 1997; Waddell, 1998). This distinctive approach allows trainees in the caring professions and professionals, such as social workers, clinical psychologists, and doctors, not only in this country but around the world, to study the development of babies and infants within the natural environments of their family and educational settings (Reid, 1997). Reid (1997, p. 1) explains that

Ideally the observer meets the parents before the baby is born, and then visits the family for an hour each week until the second birthday.

The expectation is that these hourly visits will be at the same time of day each week. This method aims to train clinical professionals who need to have the ability to focus their full attention on the infant's outer and inner worlds avoiding distractions from taking notes during the observations. Instead, they allow themselves to see and feel during the observation and then to record in as much detail as possible all the events that took place during that hour after the observation is completed. Premature attempts to explain and make formulations are actively discouraged. This procedure of weekly observations, written record-keeping and regular presentation and discussion in tutor groups, enables each observer to think about the

development of the baby and their mother over the period of 2 years (Rustin, 1989). The observations which take place in the baby's natural setting, their home environment, are presented descriptively and as narratives of what occurred during the hourly visits using everyday descriptive language. Mothers are encouraged to make no alterations to their normal routine, though it is difficult to imagine that the presence of the observer has no significance to the family (Rustin, 1989).

Having had the requirements of Naturalistic Observation explained by the course team in training, I thought that I was fully aware of the constraints upon my interactions with the family and the baby, the research subject, but I was unaware of some—what amounted for me to unnatural—demands that this type of observation places upon “normal human relationships.” For example, the search for a family was an exciting experience for me at first and the idea of closely observing a new born baby from the first days of their lives through to the foundations of the first and potentially the second year of their development filled me with awe, anticipation, and fear at times. However, at the first meeting with other trainees and professionals where the process was explained, these feelings interfered with the significant details of the care and consideration that I needed to pay attention to in setting up the infant observation correctly for both the family and myself, the observer. I started searching for a baby immediately after this initial meeting and in my first infant observation encounter with my tutor group I had already found a baby as part of the course that was offered to me from someone completely unknown to me. I soon found out in my tutor group that this case was not one I could follow through because the father of the baby appeared to be more interested in this observation than the mother.

In psychoanalytic theory (Bowlby, 1971; Winnicott, 1964), the role of the mother is significantly more important than the father in the first years of human life as babies are totally dependent for food, love, and care by their mother. However, the father clearly has a role as well as Winnicott (1964) explained that

fathers come into this, not only by the fact that they can be good mothers for limited periods of time, but also because they can help to protect the mother and baby from whatever tends to interfere with the bond between them, which is the essence and very nature of child care. (p. 17)

In reflection, I felt that I had been compulsive about finding a family quickly, being motivated more by my perfectionist and organizational drive to meet the course requirements and less by the quality of the experience. At times, I felt tense and frustrated looking for a family and this feeling was increased by the detailed and thorough notes that more experienced trainees

would present in weekly meetings. I soon realized that I needed to pace myself, be patient, and enable myself to become more focused. On reflection, group interaction built the confidence in me in searching for a family. Early in November, as I walked into a Children's Centre where I carried out voluntary work, I met a midwife who was running a pre-natal group and who offered to introduce me to the women in the group. This is how I met the mother of the baby whom I observed for nearly 2 years. Following approval of the family from my training group, I set up the meeting with the parents. The key issues that I needed to consider in this meeting were, to try to control my own anxiety, answer their questions, keep the meeting short without unnecessary chatting and not leave without a plan by asking them how they would like to set up the first observation after the baby is born.

The baby was not born yet, and this was a concern because one of the requirements for this type of training was to observe a "healthy" baby as while on training the complexities of an observation can be increased if one is involved in the study of the early development of a human being with complications. However, in my initial meeting with the parents, my first impressions were positive and my training group gave me permission to pursue the study even though a "guarantee" for a "healthy baby" could not be established at that point.

The mother was interested in this observation and informed her husband prior to our initial meeting. At this initial meeting, when I explained the rules of the observation, they accepted the limitations of the process and showed understanding and generosity, as if they were familiar with it. When I left, I was happy and grateful, but the thought of not giving something back to them overwhelmed me. My tutor challenged me on the issue of "giving back" explaining that the time, attention, consistency, and commitment to their baby is "giving back" but I still found it difficult to free my mind from associating the concept of "giving back" with material items, such as gifts or observation notes which I was not allowed to offer while on training.

When the baby was born I was informed by his mother via a text from the hospital and I was invited by the family for the first observation within the first week of his birth. The emotion I felt at having this opportunity to observe a new born human being made me realize that I needed guidance from the first days of his life through to the second year of his life. I felt that I needed advice not only in conducting the observation but also in handling my own emotions and maintaining boundaries between me and the family without appearing to be disinterested. Rustin (1989, p. 57) elaborates on how the method requires the observers to be open-minded but able to shape experiences and be receptive to particular events. The researcher must have

... the ability to hold in mind a loose cluster of expectations and conceptions, while remaining open to the experiences of the observation as it develops.

I discussed in depth the first observation with my tutor support group. In that session, I felt that I was given the attention and the time I needed to express my fears, worries, and concerns that I may not be able to hold the boundaries of communication, be appropriately distant and remain focused on the baby without looking as if I am not interested in the family as a whole or feeling that I was abusing their generosity and hospitality.

Research Design

Naturalistic Observation is qualitative in nature. It emerges out of a

contrasting knowledge-creation tradition... that requires a different way of knowing from the scientific one in which the history of social and human sciences was embedded. (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 150)

This method of observation has been used in this case for the first year of a 2-year longitudinal study of an infant and adopts a literal and factual approach to presenting the data collected. In this article, it has been used within a case study (a baby's observation) to provide material from personal experience which can be thought about in terms of its emotional significance (Rustin, 1989). The method aids the construction and reconstruction of a baby, his mother, their relationship, and his relationship with the world in a systematic way.

Method in Action

In my first observation, both parents were present and it was easier than I thought it was going to be. It showed that the parents were really clear about the boundaries that we had set up in the initial meeting and allowed me to observe the baby without interruptions. They made this first visit easy and comfortable for me and held the boundaries in a careful and natural way.

Following my first observation, I identified the issues that I felt that I had to address as related to both my case study and my role as observer. I needed to

- Ensure that I really listened to the information and/or advice on offer to provide a realistic depiction of events based on evidence;
- Continue to work on maintaining clear boundaries and control my facial expressions from expressing emotion when I observe;
- Develop more detailed narratives but at the same time maintain the vivacity of my observations in writing, for example, present the meaning of the baby's facial expressions when he looks at me
- Try to understand whether the baby identifies me as an object or whether I impose my own

projections to the observations.

Initially, I was able to remain at a distance and observe with an outsider's perspective. This method enabled me to learn in depth as much as possible about the beginnings of human life and the early development of a young child. I believe I have grown as a person through this opportunity to glimpse a world about which I had no personal knowledge or experience.

However, although I was developing awareness of the requirements of my chosen research method, the family's expectations varied with regard to the rigidity of the research method in terms of my behavior toward them and the baby. It was to be expected that this would occasionally cause difficulties in terms of their understanding of the relationship between them and me as the researcher. They had welcomed a complete stranger into their home at a very dramatic time in their own relationship. Undoubtedly, the hormonal upheaval of the pregnancy and the post-delivery phase together with the experience of labor itself and in most hospital units the postnatal ward, all play their part in creating a state of emotional vulnerability in new mothers and fathers.

The natural expectation on their part could have been that the longer our interaction continued the more likely it would be that friendship and personal commitment would ensue. Rustin (1989) agrees that undoubtedly observers may have a role of some significance in the lives of the families they visit but

often it is a quietly helpful role, in that the reliable presence of an observer... enables the mother to give herself time to think about the baby, rather than be continually carried along by the infant's practical and emotional demands. (p. 61)

Practical Lessons Learned

One of the requirements of Naturalistic Observation was that any research should cease if the baby was left alone with the researcher because of potential health and safety issues. Clearly, the mother leaving her child in my presence meant she expected me to take over the role of carer, which obliged me to cease my non-participant observer role. This happened more and more as time progressed. It proved a considerable challenge for me in that the normal human response in a relationship where trust is freely given is to respond to that trust, not draw away.

A similar challenge occurred when I felt the need to intervene in my non-participant observation as seen in the following observational moment:

I didn't think that the room was warm enough for Liam (the baby) to be naked. Mum kept him close to her breast wrapped up in his blanket but almost the whole right part

of his body was exposed and his skin was changing colour looking like he had poor circulation (17 days old).

Yet, an emotional relationship did develop quietly between the mother, the observer, and the baby, the mother has the baby in mind and the observer has both the mother and the baby in mind developing a deep often unconscious contact with both of them. Shuttleworth (1989, p. 27) refers to Winnicott's (1957) notion of "containment" in mother–infant relationship to explain the role of the observer who often "becomes the 'container' for some aspect of the mother's experience during the observations and may be disturbed by the process."

Handling the research relationship proved very problematic, and I reflected at length on how I could have avoided this situation arising. Had I explained sufficiently at the start of this research exactly what my role was to be throughout the research period of 2 years? I thought I had. Did the parents fully appreciate what I meant? I do not think they did because they were not academics and had no experience of research methods. So was I expecting too much of their appreciation of my position? Yes, I think I was. But there were also my own natural emotions at play. Seeing a baby growing up over 2 years, but remaining at a distance, remaining uninvolved was extremely difficult.

Another difficulty lay in the sheer practicalities of the Naturalistic Observation method. One is expected to see the research subject at the same time every week for the same period of time and with the same level of detachment. But stuff happens in life, in my own as well as in the family's. While I accepted my obligation to maintain this strict regime, it was not easy for the family to appreciate my apparent rigidity as to time and place of our meeting.

Perhaps the most serious challenge faced in adopting this method was the sheer level of concentration demanded. One is not allowed in this form of observation to take notes, to video or to record what is happening. One has to allow ones intuition, ones feelings to take in and retain all that occurs in terms of body language, actions, and activities and the sequence of events. And then one is faced with the logistics of leaving the research arena after the set hour and writing everything up immediately. Once again one has to ensure that life does not intervene into this rigid timeframe.

This method does not, therefore, allow for one's own needs, emotions or mood to be acknowledged. Working full-time, family commitments, one's health, none of these are allowed to intervene. Consistency of approach is essential for the research to be considered valid within the Naturalistic Observation school of thought. Neither must one forget that this strict regime is visited upon the family too, regardless of their wish on occasions for a little more flexibility.

Another critical point is that of disengagement from the research. Similarly to Rehner-Iversen's (2009, p. 10) views about research methods and procedures that affect the "getting out" or "disengagement" from ethnographic research procedures, my experience of Naturalistic Observation confirms that little or no attention has been paid to the separation from the professional field of observations to a new personal and interpersonal domain where a new relationship can be established with the family or a permanent departure will signify a final closure. The parallel group support and the mentoring process from experienced professionals is a compulsory part for anyone who wishes to make use of this research method. In my case, the tutor saw no problem with a lack of reciprocity, viewing this as a requirement of Naturalistic Observation. For me, however, it was a serious personal challenge, a problem which played upon my sense of integrity and decency regarding the need for reciprocity in human relationships. I felt that leaving the field might well affect how the research subject/participant feels toward that researcher and indeed any future research involvement.

Having outlined the challenges and difficulties of undertaking Naturalistic Observation I now need to redress the balance by reflecting upon insights gained during the course of this research which I do not believe I would have achieved without the rigor of Naturalistic Observation.

The following observational moment which highlights how Liam responds to the surroundings, a possible need for Liam to manage the space and people around him enabled me to begin to look at how agency evolves in young humans when assistance is not present:

Liam deals with mum leaving him, by fixing his eyes onto a hanging basket the rest of his body is still momentarily. Exclusivity between mum and baby was no longer there. He seems to use this object and other similar ones (like the fist in his mouth) as a way of holding himself together.

One of the incidents that strengthened Liam's agency through an internal process of envy and anxiety was

the arrival of dogs in the family. Both parents had dogs as children and wanted to bring one into the family home because "they were missing them" as they said.

This indicated abrogation of parental responsibility by bringing another "infant" they spread the care which was in fact diluted because they had three bodies to focus on Liam, Ella (his sister) and "the dog." It was clear at the very outset that Liam would have to contend with his feelings of envy. This often manifested itself at Liam's feeds when the dog would try to get on to mum's lap—effectively pushing Liam out of the way—or else, she (the dog) would require mum's

immediate attention for food or emotion as illustrated in the quote that follows:

When mum opened the door she pointed to Liam who was sitting in the dog's cage... he calls all animals "woof" and used to say "do" for "dog" but not anymore... Liam heard his mum's voice and crawled towards this direction. The dog ran fast and jumped up on mum licking her face. Liam crawled faster.

Initially, Liam tolerated these interruptions with little protests, crying or whining. At other times he would switch off. Mum, sadly, seemed unable to think whether the dog was interrupting or upsetting her communication with Liam and so the behaviors continued. I wondered to what extent the experience of having a pet might have given Liam some notion of having to share spaces, of not having to claim a space for himself in his mother's busy life. However, in the weeks that followed, as Liam got older and more physically adept, he began to be in touch with his own feelings of rivalry, and to be able to protest more strongly. It was interesting to see the expression of his own determination toward the dog, which seemed to coincide with his increasing physical development. For example, when the dog was pushing him out of the way, Liam would preserve and test his strength by crawling faster to reach mum's attention or whatever else he wanted.

My training in Naturalistic Observation method enabled me to see human development from a different perspective and experience feelings that I had never imagined before in the journey of the growing independence of a child. The needs of infants are not only extrinsic but also intrinsic and unchangeable and the distance between the infant to the toddler is a long one in terms of personality development and emotional growth. As Liam's physical aptitude developed, he became more independent of mum. He became more capable of defining his own boundaries and demanding his space. In the weeks that followed and approaching his first birthday, Liam looked sociable and more confident in stating what he wanted and this seemed to be demonstrated in his interactions with others. He was developing an independent self within an environment that paid more attention to him. At the beginning of this process of observation, I could not have imagined how much is involved in the development of a relationship between a mother and a child. Neither had I fully appreciated the way in which negative situations, such as the dog being introduced into the family, gave rise to the child's increased independence and sense of agency, offering apposite outcome to a challenging situation.

Conclusions

Despite the difficulties of such a research method there were clearly reasons for my choice. I

chose this approach because one of the most important benefits of non-participant naturalistic observation is the cultivation of intuition and feeling in the researcher when so much research methodology tells you that you should not do this. Most research methods and observational tools require scientific, theoretical, and rational ways of looking at an event or issue, taking no consideration of unconscious mental processes involved in human interactions. Fonagy (2001 in Rustin, 2006, p. 2) argues that currently psychoanalytic research is acquired to

reconstitute itself on a more “scientific basis”—that is with methods more similar in the standardisation and replicability to those of other kinds of empirical psychology.

This method acknowledges the researcher’s subjectivity in the production and analysis of data in qualitative research and allows an intuitive and critical approach as key instruments for thinking about and interpreting the research.

Therefore, Naturalistic Observation considers meanings and their interpretation as subjective phenomena and that individuals are different and make sense of the world in distinctive ways; this encourages agency and choice.

This is a unique way to work with children, to learn about the child, to connect with the child. Despite it being called non-participant observation, there is a connection but at a distance. There is an emotional connection, you grow to love this child, to feel part of his life and you become a member of his family and the mother learns from you and becomes an observer too. You both experience the beginnings of this human’s life and look at the same person.

To conclude, there is a significant body of seminal literature and contemporary research on the uses and applications of Naturalistic Observations in clinical work with babies, toddlers and children which throws light into the mental processes of human development. My experience as an observer led me to identify at times with Liam, at times with his mother and at times with my professional role, has helped me to attune to the multiple pressures that bear on the new-born child for survival and independence and the challenges and dynamic processes involved in this form of non-participant observation.

As the observer acts as the “container” of the relationship between the mother and the infant, the seminar group, when it is working well and is effective, may act as the “container” for the observer’s experiences and help to sustain, develop and maintain the observer’s capacity to attend as fully as possible to the infant and his parents during the observation visits.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are the key requirements in using Naturalistic Observation as a research method?
2. What is the role of the observer for the researcher to consider?
3. What senses does the observer use to observe and what to analyze what he observed?
What issues emerge from this?
4. What is a fact in an observation and what is an interpretation?
5. How does a naturalistic observation differ from an interview?
6. Should a non-participant observer “participate” in a naturalistic observation and what issues might this create?
7. Which aspects of Naturalistic Observation would you consider to be the most challenging for the researcher from a personal and professional point of view?

Further Reading

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